

**SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE****Senate Bill 331: Task Force to Study Paratransit in Maryland****Date: February 7, 2024**

Testimony of Disability Rights Maryland & Consumers for Accessible Ride Services  
Position: Support with Amendments

Disability Rights Maryland, DRM (formerly known as the Maryland Disability Law Center, MDLC) is Maryland's designated protection & advocacy agency, which is part of a nationwide network established by Congress to protect and advance the rights of people with disabilities. We are also providing testimony on behalf of Consumers for Accessible Ride Services (CARS), a consumer group of people with disabilities who rely on paratransit. DRM and CARS are dedicated to advancing the civil rights of people with disabilities.

DRM and CARS support SB 331 with amendments, as the bill creates a task force to study paratransit across the state. Paratransit provides transportation for people with disabilities who cannot use fixed route transit because of a disability. Paratransit connects people with disabilities to their community, work, medical care, place of worship, and culture. Paratransit in Maryland has often fallen short of the requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and leaves riders to carry the burden of poor service. Maryland paratransit riders can face long on-board and wait times, making them late to their appointments, and sometimes missing them entirely.

SB 331 with amendments creates an opportunity for the General Assembly to understand the challenges paratransit riders face and the resources available to the state. The bill sets the foundation for well-informed paratransit policy reform. We support SB 331 with amendments because the task force will provide insight on paratransit issues to the General Assembly and create a pathway to improve paratransit in Maryland.

We request the following amendments to ensure that SB 331 provides a well-rounded study to the General Assembly. The task force should be revised to include people with disabilities who use paratransit from each region of the state. Additionally, the study should include quality of service. Our suggestions prioritize the consideration of people with disabilities on the task force and service quality rather than focusing on financial metrics.

- 1. The composition of the task force should include people with lived experience of using paratransit.**

SB 331 does not include people with disabilities on the task force. People with disabilities have often been left out of conversations about policies that directly impact them. Paratransit

riders' voices must be heard, as riders have a critical understanding of the service, as well as their own needs. The task force should include at least one paratransit rider from each of Maryland's five regions. We recommend amending the bill accordingly:

(b)(8) ONE CURRENT PARATRANSIT RIDER FROM EACH OF MARYLAND'S FIVE REGIONS: WESTERN, CAPITAL, CENTRAL, SOUTHERN, AND EASTERN SHORE.

Paratransit service delivery, quality, and cost varies across the state. The General Assembly will receive a more comprehensive study if paratransit riders across Maryland's diverse regions are at the table.

## 2. The task force should study paratransit service quality.

SB 331 only requires the task force to study the "current, needed, and expected funding for paratransit; (2) reasons for current funding and spending gaps; and (3) the role public-private partnerships could play in meeting funding and service gaps." The bill should be explicit in studying overall paratransit service quality, so the state can have the information necessary to improve paratransit. The task force should consult with the Federal Transportation Administration's (FTA) guidelines for transit agencies to make complementary paratransit service compliant with the ADA.<sup>1</sup>

We advise the addition of the following amendment to section F:

(f)(4) SERVICE QUALITY ISSUES ADDRESSED IN THE FEDERAL TRANSPORTATION ADMINISTRATION'S AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT GUIDANCE INCLUDING: RESERVATION SYSTEM AND RESPONSE TIME, UNTIMELY PICK UPS, TRIP DENIALS, EXCESSIVE TRIP LENGTH, POOR TELEPHONE PERFORMANCE, PRACTICES THAT DISCOURAGE USE OF SERVICE, AND ANY ADDITIONAL MATTERS THE TASK FORCE IDENTIFIES AS IMPORTANT TO PARATRANSIT SERVICE QUALITY.

This revision requires the task force to study critical factors in paratransit performance. The FTA criteria should be considered to holistically analyze paratransit service across Maryland.

For these reasons, DRM and CARS support SB 331 with amendments. These amendments add perspectives from people with disabilities to study paratransit issues, and require the task force to focus on paratransit quality, in addition to finances. The amended composition of the

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Transit Administration, Americans with Disabilities Act: Guidance, (November 4, 2015), Chapter 8: Complementary Paratransit Service. Available online: <https://www.transit.dot.gov/regulations-and-guidance/fta-circulars/americans-disabilities-act-guidance-pdf>.



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task force and scope of the study will provide the state with key information to implement policies for better paratransit.

**For these reasons, DRM and CARS supports Senate Bill 331 with the above-mentioned amendments.**

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